The Glitter and the Grime

—"The moon doesn't care if you look at it.

It shines anyway—scarred side and all."

The conversation happened on a Tuesday.

He was in the lobby, holding a paper cup of coffee from the Thai café on the ground floor—the one that made proper Thai coffee, thick and sweet, nothing like the austere pour-overs of his former life. Dana was beside him, scrolling through her phone with the practiced efficiency of a woman who could read emails, monitor social media, and maintain a conversation simultaneously without dropping any of the three.

His headphones were in—the small ones, the wireless ones that sat inside the ear and were nearly invisible, the ones that could be mistaken for not being there at all. No music was playing. The headphones were silent. Not music. Not distraction. Just the presence of the headphones themselves—the object, the talisman, the physical reminder that a barrier existed between him and the world, even if the barrier was currently inactive. A security blanket he hadn't outgrown but could not eliminate entirely.

The voices were behind him.

Two people—colleagues, employees, he didn't know them, didn't recognize the voices—standing near the elevator bank, waiting, talking the way people in offices talked: casually, without volume control, with the assumption that no one important was listening.

They were speaking Thai.

"—the Chinese New Year party. Did you get the email?"

"Yeah. The one on the rooftop? Lunar Opulence, right?"

"It's going to be extravagant. They're bringing in that decorator who did the anniversary gala last year."

"The one with the gold lanterns?"

"The gold everything. Anyway, I heard it's mandatory for all talent divisions. Even the new signings."

"Even the international guy?"

A pause. The particular pause of two people arriving at the interesting part of a conversation—the part they'd been building toward, the part that justified the conversation's existence.

"Especially him, probably. PR wants maximum visibility before the holiday break."

"Makes sense. He's been pretty quiet since he arrived. No events, no appearances. People are starting to wonder—"

"Wonder what?"

"You know. Whether the whole move was real or just—damage control."

Damage control.

Est did not react. His body did not change. The coffee cup in his hand did not tremble. His jaw did not tighten. His eyes did not narrow. He stood exactly as he had been standing—still, composed, the capacity for stillness deployed not as a photographic tool but as a survival mechanism, the ability to absorb a blow without showing the bruise.

He heard the words. He filed them. He did not turn around.

The elevator arrived. The voices moved inside. The doors closed. The lobby was quiet again—just the hum of the building, the distant chatter of the café, the soft, persistent soundtrack of a place that was alive and working and indifferent to the small cruelties exchanged within it.

Dana, who had been reading her phone, looked up.

"The Chinese New Year party." she said. Not a question. A statement. She'd heard. Of course she'd heard. Dana heard everything—it was her job, her gift, her particular form of the same hypervigilance that Est performed through the sponge-heart. The difference was that Dana's hearing was strategic. She listened for things. Est listened to things. He couldn't help it.

He looked at her.

"The details are in your email. It's a company event—rooftop, night of the fifteenth, two days before the office holiday." She paused. The calibrated pause. The one that preceded the offering of an exit. "You don't have to go. We can make up an excuse."

An excuse.

He wanted the excuse. He wanted it the way he wanted a cigarette—not with the sharp, physical craving of addiction but with the dull, familiar longing of a person who knew what relief felt like and missed it. He wanted to say no. He wanted to say I'm not feeling well or I have a conflict or I'm washing my hair or any of the thousand socially acceptable lies that people used to avoid events they didn't want to attend. He wanted to stay home. He wanted the balcony and the jasmine and the city's noise, which was human noise, manageable noise, noise that didn't require him to smile.

He wanted to not go.

But not going was a story too. Not going was the international model who doesn't show up, who hides in his apartment, who can't face his colleagues, who is too fragile, too damaged, too broken by whatever happened with Kai to stand in a room and hold a drink and smile. Not going was ammunition for the rumors. Not going was confirmation of the narrative. Not going was the stuck window—the thing that wouldn't open, the thing that kept him sealed inside his own controlled environment, safe but suffocating.

He had to go.

"I'll go." he said.

Dana looked at him. The look. The one that saw everything—the coffee cup held too carefully, the headphones in silent mode, the stillness that was not calm but control, the entire elaborate architecture of a man who was enduring something and presenting composure.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Est, I need you to be actually sure. Not performing-sure. Not I'll-say-yes-because-saying-no-is-a-story sure. Actually sure."

He looked at her. She held his gaze. The lobby hummed around them.

"I'm actually sure," he said. "If I don't go, those people behind us are right. I'm damage control. I'm hiding. I'm the story they want me to be."

"Since when do you care about the story?"

"I don't. I care about the window."

She frowned. "The window?"

"If I don't go, it stays closed."

She studied him for a long moment. Then nodded. Once. The manager's nod—the one that said I accept your decision and I will support it and I will also be standing three feet away with an exit strategy the entire time.

"I'll go with you."

"Thank you." he said.

"Don't thank me. It's my job."

"It's more than your job."

"Don't tell anyone that. I have a reputation."

The night of the party, Est stood in his bathroom and did his makeup.

This was a ritual he performed rarely—at home, by himself, without the makeup artist's chair and the makeup artist's hands and the makeup artist's narration of each product as it was applied. At home the ritual was private. Quiet. The bathroom mirror and the ring light and the small, precise movements of his own fingers, which knew his face the way a pianist's fingers knew the keys—by memory, by repetition, by the intimate, tactile knowledge of a surface touched ten thousand times.

He worked slowly. Carefully. Foundation first—sheer, not full coverage, because this was a party and not a photoshoot, and the goal was to look like himself but slightly elevated, the way a room looked when you lit a candle. Concealer under the eyes, where the evidence of sleepless nights accumulated like sediment. A matte bronzer—warm-toned, applied with a fan brush to the hollows of his cheekbones and the bridge of his nose and the edges of his jaw, the subtle contouring that made his bone structure look deliberate rather than accidental, as if his face had been designed by an architect rather than inherited from parents who couldn't be bothered to stay.

He avoided anything reflective. No highlighter. No shimmer. Nothing that would catch a camera flash and make his fair skin look paler than it was, washed out, ghostly, the photographic equivalent of a person who had been drained of color and was trying to compensate with sparkle.

Lip tint. A single shade—muted rose, barely there, the kind of color that looked like his natural lip color but better, the way the foundation looked like his natural skin but better, the entire exercise being an extended meditation on the concept of but better, which was, when you thought about it, the entire industry's mission statement.

The face looked good. Controlled. The armor, applied at the molecular level.

He dressed.

The theme was Lunar Opulence. He had thought about this—had spent more time thinking about it than he would admit, because clothing was language and Est was fluent, and what he said with his clothes tonight mattered more than what he said with his mouth. Lunar Opulence. The moon. Gold. Red. The aesthetic of Chinese New Year filtered through a corporate entertainment company's understanding of luxury.

He chose a deep crimson turtleneck—the armor, always the armor, the high collar that covered the throat and said this skin is mine and you cannot have it. Over it, a charcoal blazer, tailored, the shoulders precise. Dark trousers. Dark shoes. The headphones in his pocket—the small ones, the emergency ones, the ones he could insert in a bathroom stall if the sponge-heart became too full and needed ninety seconds of silence to recover.

He looked like himself. Which was to say: he looked like a person who was very good at looking like he was fine.

Dana arrived to pick him up at eight.

She was wearing a deep green dress—simple, structured, the kind of dress that communicated I am here in a professional capacity but I am also a woman who understands that professional capacity and elegance are not mutually exclusive. Her hair was down, which was unusual—Dana's hair was almost always up, pulled back, managed, the physical manifestation of a woman who managed everything. Tonight it fell past her shoulders, and the falling made her look softer, younger, like a version of herself she kept stored away and brought out only for occasions that warranted it.

"You look good." Est said.

"I look like I slept eight hours and ate food my daughter cooked. Which I did." She looked at him. Assessed. Approved—the quick, comprehensive scan of a manager evaluating her client's presentation, checking for flaws the way a mechanic checked for leaks: systematically, expertly, missing nothing. "You look like a magazine cover."

"That's the idea."

"Don't forget to smile tonight. Not the professional one. The other one."

"There is no other one."

"There is. You just don't know you're doing it when it happens."

He looked at her. "When does it happen?"

"When you're not trying. When someone says something that catches you off guard. When Emma does something ridiculous. When you taste something good." She shrugged. "It's rare. But it exists. And it's the one people remember."

"I'll try."

"Don't try. That's the whole point. Just—let it happen if it happens."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then you'll look like a magazine cover all night, and everyone will think you're stunning and slightly terrifying, and that's fine too."

He almost smiled. Almost. The almost was there—a flicker, a shift at the corners of his mouth, the muscular prelude to an expression that didn't quite arrive.

Dana saw it. Filed it. Said nothing.

"Let's go." she said.

The rooftop lounge was exactly what Est had expected, which was both a relief and a disappointment—a relief because predictability was manageable, and a disappointment because he had hoped, against all evidence, that this party might surprise him.

It didn't.

The space was sleek—glass railings, polished black floors, the kind of minimalist design that communicated we spent a lot of money making this look like we didn't spend a lot of money. The view was Bangkok—the city spread below in its usual sprawl of light and chaos, the same view Est saw from his balcony but from higher up, more distant, more curated. The city as spectacle rather than habitat. The city you looked at rather than lived in.

Red and gold banners hung from the ceiling—silk, he thought, or a convincing synthetic. Long rectangular panels inscribed with characters he could read but didn't bother to read because they said what banners at Chinese New Year parties always said: prosperity, fortune, happiness. The aspirational vocabulary of a holiday that was as much about commerce as it was about tradition. The banners reflected off the polished black floors. The effect was dramatic—the red and gold multiplied, doubled, the room appearing to extend downward as well as upward, a mirror world beneath the surface where everything was inverted and everything was the same.

Expensive lilies. The scent hit Est as he crossed the threshold—sweet, heavy, the specific, almost narcotic sweetness of stargazer lilies, which were, in Est's opinion, the least interesting of all lilies. Their fragrance was too loud, too insistent, the olfactory equivalent of someone who talked too much at parties. The lilies were arranged in tall crystal vases on every table, their white petals spotted with pink, their stamens laden with pollen that would stain any surface it touched.

"Lilies." Dana said beside him, reading his expression.

"Stargazers."

"You hate them."

"Hate is strong. They're just—"

"Loud?"

"Performative."

"Like this party."

"Like every party."

She squeezed his arm. Once. Brief. The physical equivalent of I'm here. Then she released him, and they entered the room, and the room absorbed them the way rooms absorbed everyone—indifferently, continuously, with the limitless appetite of a social event that needed bodies the way a fire needed fuel.

The crowd was what crowds at company parties always were: a stratified ecosystem of executives, talent, managers, PR staff, and the various human components of an entertainment conglomerate celebrating itself. The executives wore suits. The talent wore whatever their stylists had decided communicated their brand. The managers wore compromise—professional enough to signal authority, stylish enough to signal relevance. The PR staff wore smiles.

Networking. That was the function—not celebration, not festivity, not the genuine communal joy of a holiday that, in its traditional form, was about family and food and the turning of the calendar toward spring. This was networking with a theme. Business with decorations. The same corporate social ritual that happened in every industry in every country, dressed up in red and gold and called a party.

The drone of networking executives was its own frequency—low, persistent, the steady hum of professional conversation that was not conversation but transaction, each exchange a miniature negotiation in which information was traded for access, access for visibility, visibility for leverage. Est heard it the way he heard all ambient noise—fully, involuntarily, the sponge absorbing the texture and the timbre and the emotional undercurrent of voices that were saying one thing and meaning another.

The weight of the crowd's fake laughter. He felt it immediately—not heard, felt, the way you felt a change in air pressure before a storm. The laughter that was not laughter but performance—the bright, sharp, too-loud sound of people who were laughing because laughing communicated I am approachable and I am having fun and I am the kind of person you want to be associated with. The laughter that stopped as soon as the laughing person turned away from the person they were laughing for and resumed as soon as they turned toward the next one. The laughter that was a tool, a currency, a social lubricant applied in measured doses to the

machinery of professional relationships.

Est moved through it.

He smiled. He greeted. He shook hands and wai-ed and performed the bilateral social protocol of a bicultural person in a monocultural setting—the Thai gestures for the Thai colleagues, the Western gestures for the international ones, the code-switching happening at the speed of instinct, the constant, exhausting negotiation between two cultural operating systems running simultaneously on the same hardware.

"P'Est! Welcome! How are you finding Bangkok?"

"It's home," he said. And smiled. The professional smile.

"You must be so relieved to be back."

"Very much."

"We're all so excited to work with you. Your portfolio is stunning."

"Thank you. That's very kind."

The exchange was a template. Fill in the name, fill in the compliment, fill in the gratitude. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. The conversational equivalent of a stamping machine—the same motion, the same pressure, the same product, unit after unit after unit.

He took photos. This was the job within the job—the meta-work, the labor of being seen. People approached him. They asked for photos. They held up phones and positioned themselves beside him and said Smile and he smiled and the shutter clicked and the image was captured and would appear, within minutes, on someone's story, someone's feed, someone's curated documentation of a night that was, for Est, an endurance test and was, for them, a highlight.

He acted friendly. He was friendly—Est was not unkind, was not cold in the way the internet believed, was genuinely capable of warmth and connection and the small, human exchanges that constituted social life. But friendliness at a party was different from friendliness in a kitchen or on a balcony or in the back of a van with your manager beside you humming a song. Party friendliness was performative by definition—it existed within the frame of the event, bounded by the beginning and the end, inflated by the context. You were friendly at a party the way you were beautiful on a set: with intention, with effort, with the understanding that the moment the lights went down you would return to whatever you actually were.

Which was, in Est's case, a man in a crimson turtleneck who wanted a Dirty Martini and was holding a glass of sparkling water instead.

The sparkling water was a compromise. The bar was serving cocktails—elaborate ones, the kind designed by a mixologist who understood that the primary function of a party cocktail was not to be drunk but to be Instagrammed. They came in colors: rose gold, deep red, shimmering gold with actual edible gold flakes floating in the liquid, the alchemical fantasy of drinks that were more concept than cocktail. They were served in crystal glasses—heavy, faceted, the kind that caught the light and refracted it and made the person holding them look wealthy and festive and like someone who was having the time of their life.

Est was not having the time of his life.

Est was standing near the floor-to-ceiling windows, looking like a statue of modern art—which was, he reflected, the same thing people had been saying about him since he was eighteen. He looks like art. Meaning: he looks like something you admire from a distance but don't touch. Something beautiful but inanimate. Something that exists to be looked at rather than engaged with.

The window behind him showed the city. His reflection in the glass showed the party—inverted, superimposed, the two realities layered on top of each other: Bangkok outside, the party inside, Est in between, occupying the boundary, the margin, the glass.

He was nursing the sparkling water. Holding the glass the way he held everything—carefully, with both hands when no one was looking, with one hand when they were—and watching the room with the full, penetrating, exhausting attention of a person who could not stop observing even when observation was the thing that was draining him.

He saw the influencers clustered near the photo wall—a backdrop of red peonies and gold calligraphy where people posed and preened and posted. He saw the executives in their corner, drinks heavy, voices low, the power cluster. He saw the junior staff trying to look like they belonged and the senior talent trying to look like they didn't care. He saw the specific, hierarchical choreography of a company party—who stood with whom, who crossed the room to greet whom, who waited to be approached and who did the approaching, the intricate, unwritten social map that determined status and access and the distribution of attention.

He saw all of it. He absorbed all of it.

And the sponge-heart, saturated, began to send the familiar signals—the tightening in his shoulders, the slight dulling behind his eyes, the onset of the specific exhaustion that was not physical but emotional, the fatigue of a person who had spent too long in a room full of frequencies and needed to go somewhere quiet and wring himself out.

Dana appeared at his elbow. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine."

"You've been standing in the same spot for twenty minutes."

"I'm observing."

"You're hiding."

"I'm observing from a fixed position."

"That's hiding, Est."

"It's strategic stillness."

She almost laughed. "You have thirty minutes. Then I'm pulling you out."

"I don't need to be pulled out."

"Thirty minutes."

He looked at her. She looked at him. The negotiation was silent—two people who knew each other well enough to argue without words, to concede without speaking, to reach an agreement through the specific, efficient diplomacy of a glance.

"Forty-five," he said.

"Thirty-five."

"Done."

She disappeared back into the crowd.

And then there was Hong.

Hong was leaning against the bar. The posture was deliberate—the same deliberate lean from the vending machines after the Valentine's shoot, the same one-elbow ease that communicated I am here because I have to be, not because I want to be, which was, Est realized, the same thing his own posture was communicating from across the room. Two men at the same party, both leaning against surfaces, both watching the room with expressions that said I see you and I am not impressed.

But where Est's not-impressed was quiet—contained, internal, the still water that ran deep—Hong's was visible. Hong looked like he'd wandered into the wrong party and had decided to stay out of anthropological curiosity.

The room was Lunar Opulence—red and gold, silk and crystal, the polished aesthetic of corporate celebration. Hong was ripped black jeans and a sheer black shirt that showed the shadow of his collarbones and the faint lines of his torso, the fabric

transparent enough to suggest but opaque enough to withhold, the same principle as the flowered suit but executed in the opposite direction. And over the shirt, a leather vest that looked like it had been purchased from a vintage shop in Chatuchak and then altered, distressed, personalized in ways that were invisible at a distance but would be specific up close—a safety pin here, a patch there, the small, deliberate modifications of a person who refused to wear anything that wasn't his.

He was wearing silver chains—multiple, layered, the chains catching the party's ambient light and throwing it back in small, metallic flashes that moved when he moved, like signals. Rings on every other finger—silver, heavy, the kind that left impressions on whatever they touched.

His hair was slicked back. The gray—freshly dyed, the same silver-ash from the Valentine's shoot—was pulled away from his face, exposing the sharp geometry of his features: the jaw, the cheekbones, the dark eyes that were lined and shadowed and looked, under the party's shifting lights, almost purple. The eyeliner was heavier tonight—not the clean, precise lines of the photoshoot but something more dramatic, more expressive, the work of a person who did his own makeup because his own makeup was part of his own language and he didn't trust anyone else to speak it correctly.

The lights did something to the gray hair—caught it at an angle that shifted its color, tinted it, gave it an iridescent quality that was not natural but was not entirely artificial either. The specific, in-between quality of something that had been transformed by context.

He was holding a beer. Not a cocktail—not one of the rose-gold, gold-flaked, crystal-glassed confections that the bar was serving. A beer. In a bottle. The brown glass ordinary and unpretentious and completely at odds with the room's aesthetic, the beverage equivalent of a middle finger raised at the concept of Lunar Opulence.

Hong watched the room with the expression Est had seen at the Valentine's shoot—the boredom that might be guardedness, the flat affect that might be assessment, the look of a person who was taking in a lot of information and choosing to react to none of it.

He'd been modeling for two years—Est knew this from the brief profile he'd read in the company materials, the thumbnail biography that told you everything about a person that didn't matter and nothing about a person that did. Two years. Not long. Not the six years Est had invested, the decade that some of the senior models had logged, the lifetime that the industry demanded in exchange for the privilege of being looked at. Two years was new. Two years was still deciding whether this was a career or a detour.

Hong, Est suspected, was still deciding.

Est watched him for longer than he intended. He watched the way Hong held the beer bottle—loosely, by the neck, the grip of a person who was drinking because the beer was there and not because the beer meant anything. He watched the way Hong's eyes moved through the room—not scanning, not searching, but cataloging, the same systematic observation that Est performed involuntarily, except Hong did it with an expression that suggested he found the whole exercise mildly amusing.

And then Hong's eyes found Est's.

Across the room. Over the heads of the crowd. Through the red and gold and the drifting stargazer pollen and the performative laughter and the crystal glasses catching the light. Hong looked at Est, and Est looked at Hong, and neither of them looked away.

Not for one second. Not for two.

For three.

Three seconds of eye contact across a crowded rooftop while the city glittered below and the banners swayed and the room performed its assigned function of networking and celebration and the production of social capital. Three seconds during which Est felt—not thought, felt—something shift. A recognition. Not attraction, not yet, nothing so simple or so nameable. Just the recognition of a person who was doing the same thing he was doing: standing at the edge of a room he didn't want to be in, holding a drink he didn't want to drink, watching people perform versions of themselves they didn't want to be.

Hong raised his beer bottle. A fraction of an inch. The smallest possible toast. The gesture of a person acknowledging another person across a distance, saying: I see you. I see that you see me. That's enough for now.

Est didn't raise his glass. He didn't need to. The acknowledgment was in the not-looking-away. The three seconds. The stillness that met the stillness, the watcher who watched the watcher, the two men at the same party who understood the same thing about parties and were choosing, separately and identically, to endure them.

Hong looked away first. Took a sip of his beer. The boredom settled back into place like a curtain falling after an intermission—the show was not over, but the intermission was, and the audience was expected to return to its seats.

Est stood by the window. Bangkok hummed below. The sparkling water was going flat in his hand. Dana's thirty-five-minute countdown was ticking somewhere in the background of the evening.

He didn't reach for the headphones in his pocket.

For the first time in a long time, he didn't need them.